

Private use of government e-mail

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WASHINGTON — Some personal electronic mail is OK. Engaging in illegal activity on the Internet is not. Between those extremes, people sometimes wonder where to draw the line.

Now, courtesy of the Air Force, comes "rules of the road" for those out on the increasingly crowded information highway. These can be found in a new instruction, AFI 33-119, E-Mail Management and Use, due to the field early this year.

"If used properly, e-mail is a superb tool to complement and improve our communications," said Lt. Col. Frank McGovern, chief of Air Force communications and information policy at the Pentagon. "However, just like other forms of communication, such as the telephone or correspondence, there is a potential for abuse.

"All Department of Defense civilian employees and military personnel are accountable for the con-

tent of the e-mail messages they send," McGovern said.

Air Force e-mail systems are provided to support Air Force missions, the colonel said. So people "must use e-mail for official, authorized and ethical activities in the best interests of the Air Force."

Some personal use of e-mail is authorized. The first supervisor who is a commissioned officer or civilian above GS/GM-11 in a worker's chain of command or supervision can authorize the extent of personal e-mail use.

However, supervisors do not have complete discretion in the matter. They must look to the joint ethics regulation, the new Air Force instruction and any major-command or unified combatant command policies for specific guidance.

Official use, the colonel said, includes emergency communications and communications deemed necessary in the interest of the government. For instance, to boost morale and welfare, theater commanders may approve communications by military members and

other DOD employees deployed for extended periods away from home on official business.

McGovern noted some examples of authorized personal e-mail use:

- Brief communications made by DOD employees while traveling on government business to notify family members of official transportation or schedule changes.

- Personal communications from the DOD employee's usual work place most reasonably made from work. This includes checking in with a spouse or minor children; scheduling doctor and auto or home repair appointments; brief internet searches and e-mailing directions to visiting relatives.

Personal e-mail should not interfere with performance of official duties, McGovern said. It should be brief and made during an employee's personal time whenever possible. He stressed that all e-mail communications should be polite, respectful and professional. Profanity is never appropriate.

"The basic standards for em-

ploying e-mail are common sense, common decency and civility," McGovern said. "This includes following traditional military protocols and courtesies.

"Do not use e-mail for purposes that reflect adversely on the Air Force," he said. He listed examples such as pornography, chain letters, unofficial advertising, soliciting or selling and other uses incompatible with public service.

An example of improper use of e-mail includes sending or forwarding disparaging or derogatory comments attacking someone's character or integrity. These types of e-mail messages conflict with the Air Force's high ethical standards.

"As a rule, the content of your e-mail messages should follow the same basic guidelines we use with other communications media," McGovern said.

Federal civilian employees and military personnel must also abide by other e-mail edicts.

These and other more detailed rules of the road will appear in the new Air Force instruction.

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